Telephone interview with former PhM3c Alfred Putnam Samuels, Jr., World War II hospital corpsman. Assigned to PCE(R) 852. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 21 March 2005. (1926-2023)

Where are you from?
I was born in Charlottesville, VA, in 1926.

How did you end up joining the Navy?
Those were the Depression years. We knew what it was like in the world. When I turned 17, I wanted to join the Navy. I wanted to do my bit. I joined in 1943.

Did you join from Charlottesville?
I signed up in Charlottesville. They took us to Richmond and ran us through the physical there. They swore us in, put us on a train, and took us to Sampson, New York for boot camp.

What was boot camp like for you?
I looked like I was about 13 years old. When I got to boot camp and they took us to the barracks, the chief in charge of the barracks gave me a note. He said, "My wife is a nurse in the next unit over there and I want you to take this and deliver it to her." So I found my way over to the hospital area and I gave the note to his wife. When she read it she said, "Do you know what this says?"
I said, "No."
It said, "Would you look at what's carrying this note."

How old were you?
I was 17.

So you had to get your parents' signature.
Yes.

Did you want to be a corpsman right from the beginning?
Well, I didn't want to kill anybody. I was brought up here in town and we had never heard of any violence at all here in those days. I didn't want to kill anybody but I wanted to do my part so I figured I'd be a corpsman.

Did you go to corps school?
Yes.

Was that also at Sampson?
No. It was in Bainbridge, [MD].

What was your first assignment after you finished corps school?
Charleston, SC.
You became a ward corpsman?
Yes.

What kind of duty was that for you?

It was fine. I seemed to have had an affinity for it. At least that's what the doctors said.

Where did you go from there?

I ended up going to the Navy Pier in Chicago. At the end of the pier was a hospital area. From there I moved to Great Lakes. There a few of my buddies saw a sign on the board asking for volunteers for a suicide mission. You couldn't be married and all that sort of thing. So we ended up signing up for it.

Did they tell you what the suicide mission was?

No. In fact, they didn't really call it a suicide mission.

But you assumed it meant something dangerous.

Yes. Then we were shipped out to a training base in the California mountains. We were supposed to be going with the Marines, but at the last minute they canceled the mission.

Where did you go after that?

They sent me to Treasure Island, put me aboard ship, and sent me to Hawaii. The first night there we were eaten up by huge mosquitoes. We hung around there for a few weeks waiting for our ship to come in. When the USS PCE(R) 852 [patrol craft escort rescue] came in, we went aboard. There were nine corpsmen and a doctor.

Do you remember the name of the doctor?

Yes. Dr. Raymond Malott. He's still around and lives in Arizona. You'll love talking with him.

So you reported aboard with your nine corpsmen and physician and headed across the Pacific.

Yes. We went in company with the 851, the 852, and the 853. They were our sister ships. We stayed together most of the time while we were over there.

What was the mission of these vessels?

Our ship was designated Patrol Craft Escort Rescue. The three ships went over by ourselves and picked up the convoy at Ulithi. Each ship was a floating MASH unit, but as patrol craft, we were unmarked and subject to attack just like everybody else. We did patrol duty on convoys, dropped ash cans on suspected submarines, and shot down planes like everybody else.

You had anti-aircraft guns, then.

We had a 3 ½ up forward, six 20mm, and two single 40mm Bofors. On the fantail, we had two rails of ash cans holding about 8 each, and two Y-guns [depth charge launchers] on each side.

So you were pretty well armed.

We were armed very similar to a DE, I would say.

Where did you start patrolling?

We went with the invasion fleet headed to Leyte in October of '44. Everyone wanted to know what we were because we were pretty new at that time. Nobody knew what the "R" stood for. A lot of ships thought it meant repair. Even the fleet commanders didn't even know what it was.

But we were there and ended up fighting just like everybody else. A plane came over the island, dropped a torpedo, and hit the *Honolulu* up forward near her bow. We were ordered to cruise in circles around her and if another plane came in, we were supposed to take it.

Was it badly damaged?

Yes, there was a lot of damage. That evening, we went in and took the wounded off her. That was our first handling of casualties.

What did you do with the wounded?

We treated them and kept them aboard, then took them to a hospital ship when one became available.

Were there any in that vicinity?

Yes. I think the *Relief* was in there.

Didn't they have a sick bay on the *Honolulu*?

Oh, sure. But these casualties had been blown to hell. There were guys with their legs blown off. They didn't even get all the bodies out until she got back for repairs.

What did you do after you off-loaded your patients?

Sometimes they'd bring wounded off the beach to us, in LSTs, or anything else that was available. We had a small operating room and a pharmacy. We also had a small space with pull-down racks. The sick bay itself held about 75, if I remember correctly.

They'd bring casualties out from the beaches to us in landing craft day and night. We took aboard everybody from Army to Seabees. The landing craft would approach us from the fantail and then our crew would assemble and then manhandle the casualties aboard.

Did you have litter lifts?

No. We manhandled them aboard from the landing craft. In fact, I have the names of some of the landing craft right here. I can even tell you the names and serial numbers of the guys we brought aboard. LST-621-1 was one that brought us wounded. There were a lot of LSTs. It says here that some of them were transferred to the USS Mt. *Olympus* (AGC-8). We went alongside the USS *Clay* (PA-39) and transferred some wounded to them.

About this time the Japanese fleet came up through the Suragao Straits and attacked. I remember going up on deck. It was something to sit up there and watch the flashes of battle going on and knowing that if they got through, we wouldn't have stood a chance. We would have been decimated.

Suragao Strait was a tremendous American victory.

Oh, yes it was.

Did you receive casualties from that fight?

We got casualties from everywhere.

So your mission was as an intermediary. You would take the casualties, treat them as best you could, and then get them to where they could get definitive care.

That's right.

If that meant off-loading onto a hospital ship, that's what you would do.

Right. They also had transports that had better hospital facilities than we did. A lot of those were unmarked. We transferred patients to whatever ships were available that could take care of them. Some we kept for a long while; some we off-loaded pretty quickly.

Do you remember any hot situations where you were really overwhelmed with casualties?

Oh, yes. Sometimes we had them lying in every bunk. The sick bay was filled. The crew would give up their bunks. The galley worked 24 hours a day trying to feed the guys who could eat. Sometimes we worked for several days in a row without sleep. There were times we'd fall asleep right on deck.

Where did you go after the Philippine campaign was over?

We went to Ulithi for a short time to repair a screw that had been damaged by hitting a log or something. Our flank speed was something like 14 knots. With the propeller bent like it was, we could do 12, and it felt like the ship was shaking apart.

After our repair, we went back to Leyte again for a very short time. That was about the time the kamikazes started coming. We just did rescue work until we went with the invasion fleet up to Lingayan.

You say you began to see some kamikaze activity?

Yes. There was always something going on. We were always going to the rescue or taking aboard wounded. On one occasion, a kamikaze hit a transport of some type and they had more than they could handle so the doctor went over there. The 851 also went alongside and her doctor went aboard to help out. Their doctor and our doctor did all they could but they lost most of them. They were so badly burned they couldn't survive.

Did you actually witness any of these kamikaze attacks?

Oh, sure.

It must have been a terrifying experience.

There was the one time I realized that I was scared. We were standing on the fantail during a relaxed period when I looked up and there was this Jap plane coming in. It tilted over and headed down toward us. I realized I was backing up. About that time, everybody realized it was a Jap and they opened up on him. He started trailing black smoke, banked off, and headed off across the island. I don't remember being scared at any other time. I think I was fatalistic about things. After you've seen a few planes and what they can do, it was devastating. I can tell you stories that are unbelievable.

You must have seen the results of many kamikazes.

Yes I did. Anyway, we were at Luzon then went out alongside the *Missouri* after the big hurricane when they lost so many ships.

Do you remember that big storm?

Oh, yes. It was pretty bad. We lost a lot of destroyers that flipped right over.

You must have been somewhat concerned.

Not really. Our ship was 187 feet long and had a 38-foot beam. You would look over the side and the ocean would open up, open up, open up. You would swear that you were gonna see the bottom of the ocean, and it seemed a mile deep. This big hole just opened up in the ocean and the ship tilted over the side of that hole and slid down into it. And when it got to the bottom of it you looked up and there was nothing but a little opening up there where you could see the sky. The rest of it was water and it all started tumbling in on you and you knew you were gonna be inundated. And then the ship just rode up over it and came down. It was different from a carrier or one of the larger ships. They just got beaten to the dickens because they plowed into those waves. We rode up and down like a cork.

So you never had any concern about capsizing?

No. We made a turn one time when we almost lost it, but only one time. Anyway, at Luzon the *Hardy*? got hit by a kamikaze. The survivors were picked up by her sister ship and taken to the *California*. That night the sister ship was hit and the survivors were picked up by the *California*. With the fleet underway, we tied up alongside the *California* and took them off. They had lifts. They also ran a plank between the ships. Those that could walk would get over when they could. When we got them aboard, the Japanese attacked and shrapnel was raining down. The task force commander then rang up for speed, which we could not maintain. That speed was 18 knots, much faster than we could travel. So they were cutting lines--throwing off lines before the *California* began dragging us. I was standing in front of the watertight door leading to the fantail where the sick bay was trying to calm these guys down. These men already had two ships blown out from under them. And the *California* had been hit while they were aboard.

So these were the men you had just taken aboard.

Yes. All they wanted to do was jump overboard. We took aboard 109 casualties and survivors that day.

And, I'm sure, there were some pretty badly injured people among them.

Absolutely. These guys had their guts in their hands. Some were burned so bad you wouldn't believe it. Or they had an arm blown off or just hanging by a thread, or they had their chests blown open. You'd be surprised how much damage the human body can take and still survive. We saw it all. (This is not a description of the 109. This is a description of what we encountered overall.)

Things got pretty bad with the kamikazes off Okinawa.

The opening day at Okinawa was a wash. There was nothing. It was as quiet as it could be. Then, of course, they had established picket lines around the island. The big boys were way

out in one outer circle. Then there were the medium size ships. Then the destroyers. Then the PCS.

So you were the innermost ring?

No. We worked all the rings from the destroyers on down. We'd go out and hang around until someone got hit. There was the *Dickerson*, the *Belknap*.

Do you remember any of them in particular?

Oh, yes. I remember lots of them. The USS *Ralph Talbot* [DD-390] was one I'll never forget. It's not easy to tell this story. It gets to you.

We got the call and headed out towards dusk. She had taken a kamikaze. When we got there, the Japanese were still trying to finish her off so we couldn't get a whaleboat in the water to go over.

Our ship and the *Ralph Talbot* were both underway steaming toward Okinawa. The captains finally brought the two ships close together and we jumped from one ship to another. It was right around dark. When you looked down between those ships and saw that churning water, you knew that if you missed that was it. You'd never survive the screws.

We had our packs on our backs and we jumped from the 852 over to the *Ralph Talbot*. When they opened the hatch and we stepped in, the blood was washing back and forth as the ship rolled. Then the lights came on and there was a guy laying over there. And every time his heart beat, the blood from his wound shot across the space. Another guy had his legs missing. Some were very badly burned. They were very, very bad. The doctor and we five corpsmen spent the night working on them.

Did they have any medical people aboard the *Talbot* at the time?

I don't recall. I don't think so. Towards morning we were getting near Kerama Retto at Okinawa where we were going to transfer these men from the *Talbot* to another unmarked transport equipped as a hospital ship.

It must have been an APH.

Yes. It was the APH-2, the USS *Pinkney*. Once we transferred them, they were immediately taken to the operating room. They gave us a bunk and some chow. What I remember next was being awakened and hearing, "We're under attack. We're under attack again. Your ship just came in and is getting ready to leave. You've got to get over there right away!"

So they rushed us down to a whaleboat, put us in it while all this was going on. Our ship was underway so we went up alongside and scrambled aboard.

We were a few miles out when we got a call to go back. The APH had just been hit by a kamikaze. We started back but got another call that she was okay. In fact, she was better equipped than we were.

Later on, while we were at Saipan on our way back to Pearl, we went ashore for some supplies and I recognized one of the guys from the *Pinkney*. He told me that the plane had hit where they had put these guys and several of the casualties had been killed.

It must have gotten very depressing after awhile seeing all this carnage over and over and over again.

Oh, sure. But you built up a resistance to it. My daughter and I were talking about it this morning because she had spent the night with her mother at the hospital. The barriers you put up to protect yourself.

There was the USS *Luce* (DD-522). It had also been hit. Then the USS LSM(R) 190. It was night, it had been hit, and we were sent to the rescue. She was way out so we had to move at flank speed. At flank speed, we left a phosphorescent wake that was like an arrow pointing right to us.. As we got near the 190, a Jap plane came in right over our bow and dropped flares. It then banked, turned, came back, and dropped a torpedo, then cleared our mast by a few feet. The torpedo landed about 50 yards in front of us.

The 190 had already taken three kamikazes. One was still sticking out of the ship's side. When we pulled alongside I saw a kid at a 20mm just frozen to the gun and staring off into space. They had been fighting for hours and he was just frozen to that 20mm.

There's another story. This one's kind of funny. A transport had been hit. The doctor and some of us corpsmen got in the whaleboat and went over to take care of the wounded. The doctor was taking care of them while we went down below to take a look at the damage and make sure no one was down there. I remember looking down in the debris and seeing a pigtail in the wreckage--the pilot's pigtail just laying there. There was also a load of hand grenades.

We also found was a hole in the side of the ship big enough to put a house through. The kamikaze had sheered the deck where all the supplies were. It was nothing but beer, cases of beer. Our launch came up to that hole and we started throwing some cases of beer aboard.

So that was the Okinawa campaign. That was probably the last campaign for you.

Yes. On Saturday, the 30th of June we left Okinawa and made a stop in Saipan to pick up supplies and then went on to Pearl where we were being refitted for the invasion of Japan.

Do you remember hearing about the bomb?

Yes. We heard about the bomb. At one of our reunions years later in Kansas City, we went to the Truman Library and I recall that we all said, "Thank you." There wasn't a guy there who didn't say "Thank you for dropping the bomb." There's no way we would have survived the invasion of Japan. That ship would not have survived it.

You were probably pretty glad the war was over by that time.

Very glad. War is a young man's game.

I want to thank you for sharing these experiences. I know it's a difficult thing to talk about even after all these years. And time doesn't seem diminish any of it.

Many years later, I found the first guy I'd served with. And even after all the years, the first thing he said was, "Sammy, does it still bother you?" He said that he still woke up with it. We all did. There were times you'd wake up in the morning and made the mistake of thinking about it. Early morning was the bad time because it always seemed that if a badly wounded man was going to expire, he seemed to do so around 4 or 5 just before the sun came up. A few reunions ago, the doctor finally admitted to me that it still bothers him, too.